

Advice on supporting your kids after a traumatic event

How children react to trauma is different from adults

How children react to trauma is different from adults – they may withdraw or behave in a more “babyish” way, seem anxious or clingy, be preoccupied with the event in their play or drawing, have problems sleeping or nightmares, or may get physical symptoms such as stomach aches or headaches.

As with adults, most children will recover with support and love from those around them.

As parents or caregivers you will know your kids best, and what works for them. Some simple *dos* and *don'ts* to guide you support a distressed child are:

Do:

1. **Reassure** them that the event is over and they are safe.
2. **Encourage** them to talk about how they feel about what happened.
3. **Tell them they can ask questions**, and answer these in plain language appropriate to their age – be honest but avoid details of the trauma.
4. **Tell them that feeling upset or afraid is normal**, and that telling you how they are feeling will help, that with time they will feel better.
5. **Be understanding** – they may have problems sleeping, tantrums, wet the bed – be patient and reassuring if this happens – again, with support and care it will pass.
6. **Give your children extra love and attention.**
7. **Remember that children look to their parents to both feel safe and to know how to respond** – reassure them, share that you are upset too but that you know you will all be fine together.
8. **Try to keep to normal routines** – mealtimes, bedtimes etc. – allow them to get out and play, to go to the park etc.
9. **HOWEVER if a child's distress is escalating, or they are displaying any worrying behaviours – extreme withdrawal, terror that you cannot comfort them from etc – seek help early. Your GP is a good start, OR For support with grief, anxiety, distress or mental wellbeing, you can call or text 1737 – free, anytime, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week - to talk it through with a trained counsellor.**

Don't:

1. **Talking about the details of a traumatic event** repeatedly can be harmful. Children may be fascinated/horrified and may want to ask about details, talk about what they saw/experienced.
2. **If this is repeated try to refocus them on how they are feeling** e.g. what happened is awful, it's normal to feel upset or afraid, how are you feeling?.
3. **Don't tell them “don't worry” or “don't be upset”** – it is natural to want to protect them from fear and difficult emotions, but they need to have their feelings acknowledged and validated as a normal response.
4. **Try not to be over-protective**, again this is a natural thing for a parent to do, but as part of keeping normal routines, it is helpful for your child to be distracted by going to the park, playing with friends outdoors etc. This helps them feel that their world is safe again, and that normal life can go on.

Grief in children who have lost a friend or whānau member

As with trauma, how children react to grief differs from adults, and is affected by their age. When a death is traumatic, as with adults this can make their grief process more complex.

Children's beliefs about death change as they grow up

Pre-school children may see it as temporary – that the person is “asleep” but will wake up. Primary school children start to think of it more like adults, but often believe it will not happen to them or anyone they know.

Children do not always have the words to talk about how they are feeling

Children do not always have the words to talk about how they are feeling, so tend to express their feelings through behaviour – being withdrawn, sulking, being naughty, tantrums, refusing to go to school and so on. Children tend to grieve in “bursts”, so may go from seeming completely back to normal, to being distressed, repeatedly.

So it is important to be more than usually patient

It is important to be more than usually patient, and to check out how they are feeling and try to talk to them about this. As with trauma, while it is natural to try to protect your children from pain and grief, this is not helpful.

Children look to adults to learn how to behave, so asking how they are feeling, asking what questions they have, and explaining things in words appropriate to their age, is key.

Sharing some of your own sadness, while also showing them that you can cope and life can go on, is helpful. Explaining death in words they will understand is also helpful. Avoid using words that may confuse them, such as “gone to sleep forever”, or “passed on”.

It is also common for children experiencing grief to become more clingy or anxious, and fearful

It is also common for children experiencing grief to become more clingy or anxious, and fearful that other important figures in their life may die. It is also, as with trauma, common for them to develop physical symptoms – stomach aches, headaches – and to also have usual sleep routines change. Reassurance and comforting are important for them to feel safe and loved.

These practical tips will help

The practical tips above are helpful for supporting your child through grief after a traumatic death. Maintaining usual routines, and ensuring they are encouraged to play, and express themselves through drawing, are all good strategies.

It is also helpful to ensure their teacher and school are aware of what has happened to your child, and to agree with the teacher how they can support your child, how this information is shared with their classmates, and what to do if your child becomes distressed at school.

As with adults, grief in children passes over a number of months, your love, consistency, and care of your child, along with continuing to encourage them to talk, and sharing information in words they understand, is what is most healing for them.

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